

4. Defining Homelessness

Perhaps one of the greatest obstacles to determining the number of homeless is the lack of a consistent definition of the term. The Alcohol, Drug Abuse and Mental Health Administration defines homeless as "anyone who lacks adequate shelter, resources, and community ties."¹ Meanwhile, in a report to the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, homeless were defined as "people in the 'streets' who, in seeking shelter, have no alternative but to obtain it from a private or public shelter." Residents of half-way houses, congregated living facilities and long-term detoxification centers were not classified as homeless under this definition.²

In July of 1987, Congress enacted the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act. The act defined homeless persons as:

- (1) an individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; or
- (2) an individual who has a primary nighttime residence that is-
 - (A) a supervised or publicly operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations (including welfare hotels, congregate shelters, and transitional housing for the mentally ill);
 - (B) an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized; or
 - (C) a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings.

In the winter 1989 issue of *Intergovernmental Perspective*, the problems relating to a lack of a universal definition were outlined. They wrote, "too narrow definition of homelessness can lead to public policy responses that ignore those persons and families who are at risk of becoming homeless. Too broad a definition of homelessness can lead to public policy responses that are too diffuse to cope adequately with the problem of homelessness."³

Because of the limited scope of point prevalence counts, no previous definition may be applicable in whole.⁴ No attempt was made to make a street count of the homeless because of the impossibility of the task and lack of personnel to conduct such a count; we have, however, used several methodologies to estimate the total homeless population. It is nearly impossible to count those who have "doubled up" with friends or family but are technically homeless.

¹"A Special Report, Assisting the Homeless", *Intergovernmental Perspective* 15 (Winter 1989) 32.

²U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *Report to the Secretary on the Homeless and Emergency Shelters* (May 1984), pp. 6-7.

³"A Special Report, Assisting the Homeless", *Intergovernmental Perspective* 15 (Winter 1989) 32.

⁴Persons in correctional institutions, mental institutions, nursing homes, or long-term (greater than 90 days) drug and alcohol treatment facilities are not counted. Some youth detention facilities are counted but the total numbers are tiny; residents of transitional housing units run for the homeless are included in this count.